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Music and Religion in Islam

AMNON SHILOAH (JERUSALEM)

I An Overview

Last year, following the victory of the Talibans in Afganistan, most of the Western press published reports referring to various manifestations of the new regime's fundamentalism. One such report that appeared in the prestigious French daily „Le Monde“ (12 October 1996), told of a presumably authoritative edict calling upon the Afghans, who are very fond of birds, to open their cages and free their feathered friends. They would thus avoid enjoying the singing of the birds, as Islamic law prohibits the listening to music. Although I seriously doubt the reliability of the news item, and construe it as either a misinterpretation or misunderstanding, it can nevertheless be regarded as an indication of the vigorous, enduring debate over the permissibility of music in Islam, a debate to which this essay is dedicated. Unlike this anecdotal introduction to the subject, however, my attempt to describe and analyse the conflicting views characterizing the interminable, age-old argument, will essentially refer to appropriate sources¹. Many of these sources are in the form of real or hypothetical responses provided by recognized religious authorities to a variety of questions addressed to them by their contemporaries.

The Samāʿ

The predominant term or concept under which the writings of this category appear is *samāʿ*² which literally means listening or audition and by extension, the music listened to; it also includes dance as practised mainly by many mystic confraternities. The abundant literature dealing with the *samāʿ* concerns primarily the question of lawfulness or unlawfulness of music and dance from a legal, theological and mystical point of view. The concept of *samāʿ* is contrasted with *ghināʾ* (cantus) which by extension designates music, music making and performance, associated mainly with secular art music; this is normally banished by most of the authors who deal with *the samāʿ*. It is interesting to note in this respect that the exclusive assimilation of the concept *ghināʾ* with a kind of urbanized art music and music making has occasionally led religious authorities to combine Koran cantillation, the singing of unaccompanied hymns, old bedouin songs and the simple functional folk tunes marking events in the life of individual and community in the category of permissible forms of *samāʿ*. In other words, they

¹ Many of the sources I refer to in this article are described in my RISM volume: *The Theory of Music in Arabic Writings* (Munich 1979), RISM, series B.117 items dealing with the problem of the lawfulness of music are included in this analytical catalogue. They represent a variety of conflicting opinions expressed by authors dating from the 9th to the 18th century.

consider all these forms as „non-music“, contrasting with *ghināʾ*² - the sole genre to which the appellation music is applied³.

The interminable debate about the *samāʿ*⁴ already emerged during the first centuries of Islam and has been perpetuated with various degrees of intensity until our own days. In all the major centers of Islam extending from India, Indonesia and Central Asia to Africa, legalists, theologians, spiritual leaders, urban custodians of morality, the *litterati* and leaders of mystic confraternities, all took part in this debate which elicited views that vary from complete negation to full admittance of all musical forms and means including the controversial dance. Between the two extremes, one can find all possible nuances. Some authorities, for instance, tolerated a rudimentary form of cantillation and functional song, but banned any instrumental accompaniment; others allowed the use of a frame-drum but without discs, forbidding all other instruments, particularly those belonging to the cordophone family. The mystic orders, for whom music and dance held a vital part in the performing of spiritual and ecstatic rites, were seriously concerned with the debate and participated ardently in the polemics. In this respect, one should remember that most of the harshest attacks against music and dance led by the jurists were obviously directed against the mystics or sufis⁵, and their singing and dancing practices, which in given cases embodied manifestations of profligacy.

The Legal sources

From the foregoing general remarks it follows that from the very beginning the religious authorities in Islam, be they legalists, traditionalists or theologians, adopted a reserved attitude toward the overt use of music in worship. In so doing, they became the major cause of the absence of recognized official mosque music which might have paralleled church or synagogal music. Before proceeding to an analysis of this attitude, it would be useful to keep in mind the fundamental axiom that no single canonist or religious authority, whatever his rank, can a priori decide on a prohibition or authorization; such an authority is expected to base his arguments either on direct references in the sacred writings, or on analogic exegesis. One of the major difficulties encountered in dealing with the question of lawfulness is the fact that the most sacred text, the Koran, contains almost nothing expressly concerning music. In view of this lack, protagonists all turned to another authoritative source: the *ḥadīth* (Traditions of the Prophet) which in the course of time acquired the force of law. By the last year of Muhammad's life it was already a pious custom, when two Muslims met, for one to ask for news (*ḥadīth*) and the other to respond with a saying of the

² The various forms and genres of folk and religious music were given appellations that emphasize their verbal character. Music-making is designated by the verb „to say“; a local style is *lahja* (dialect); a folk musician is called *qawwāl* (one who says), *shāʿir* (poet), *ʿāsheq* (lover), *maddāh* (eulogist) etc; cantillation of the Koran is called reading or reciting.

³ The first manifestations of mysticism as an organized movement go back to the middle of the second century of Islam (8th century). The movement assumed different forms in different countries.

Islamic mysticism is known as sufism, a word derived from the Arabic for wool (*ṣūf*) and originally applied to certain ascetics who wore clothes made of coarse wool as a sign of penitence and renunciation of worldliness.

prophet or an anecdote about him. Each *ḥadīth* is composed of a basic text the authenticity of which was guaranteed by a chain of witnesses. After Muhammad's death this custom was perpetuated and the term *ḥadīth* continued to be applied to sayings and stories that of course were no longer new. There was also a growing number of fabricated *ḥadīth* conceived to serve various political and ideological interests until, finally, two authoritative collections that became models and rules for living were accepted; they were compiled by al-Bukhārī (d. 870) and Muslim (d. 874), both were called *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Genuine). For an idea of the huge amount of *ḥadīth* that were in circulation, it is helpful to realize that al-Bukhārī's authoritative collection includes 7000, chosen from among 600.000.

Recourse to the *ḥadīth* and the analogous exegesis by great authorities, form the basis of most of the arguments put forward by both the opponents of music and those who defended its cause, the same *ḥadīth* often being used to prove a given point and its opposite. We have now reached the principal question: what provoked the hostile attitude toward music adopted by its adversaries, and what lay behind the debate conducted by its defenders? What circumstances evoked these divergent approaches?

The first treatise on the unlawfulness of music

Before delving into detail, I wish to draw attention to a significant chronological event which I believe can shed light on the above questions. This event was the appearance of the first full-scale treatise constituting one of the fiercest attacks on music, which became a model for all subsequent texts on the subject. Its author, Ibn abī'l-Dunya (823-894), was a great student of tradition who lived a reclusive life devoted to religion. He was also the tutor of the caliph al-Mu'taḍid (892-902) and his son, al-Muktafi, who reigned between 902 and 908. It is worth mentioning the pertinent fact that the caliphs, known as the commanders of the faithful, embodied the unity of the religious and secular in Islam, and they held absolute sway. In the main, however, they were enthusiastic supporters of art music, making it an integral part of their regal life and a model of inspiration for the upper strata of society. Yet, although obliged to obey the rules of Islam and the sacred law that regulated social as well as religious life, they were in open conflict with the learned expounders of Islamic religion and law. In the face of their passionate love for music and eagerness for pleasure, which were often combined with drinking and libertinage, it is easy to understand the vexation of Muslim rigorists who therefore adopted a puritanical attitude, stressing scriptural revelation and religious observance more than feelings. To my understanding, this conflicting attitude may well have been one of the major factors in the emerging debate over the lawfulness of music.

This was against the background of Ibn abī'l-Dunya's diatribe against music. He was indeed an eyewitness to the development of the highest blossoming of art music as well as of Islamic civilization, a period that became known as the Golden Age of Muslim civilization.

The Malāhī

In the title of his work *Dhamm al-malāhī* (Condemnation of the *malāhī*), Ibn abī'l-Dunya used the concept *malāhī* in a sense that implied a puritanic approach to all kinds of amusement and recreation. Indeed, the term *malāhī* is a derivative of *lahw* (pastime, diversion) which was used figuratively by contemporary authors to designate musical instruments in studies dealing with secular music. Ibn abī'l-Dunya seems to have been the first to have systematized and conceptualized its pejorative meaning to indicate what he called: „the instruments of diversion“ and he extended its meaning to include any forbidden music and other means of amusement that distract the faithful from performing their religious duties. This specific interpretation of the concept has guided all subsequent authors who dealt with the question of the lawfulness of music.

Ibn abī'l-Dunya's treatise⁴ is composed of a sequence of 68 *ḥadīths* of varying length with occasional comments meant to clarify certain abstruse statements. Almost all his references to musical instruments, music, and music making are interwoven with statements concerning other forbidden pleasures and misbehaviour that are incompatible with the performance of religious duties, or moral conduct, and that will bring perdition to their perpetrators. The last 30 *ḥadīths* do not touch upon music but are entirely devoted to the interdiction of divination, games and gambling (backgammon and chess), as well as male and female sodomy.

It follows that the author applies the concept *malāhī*, which occurs in the title of the work, to a whole gamut of forbidden pleasures and moral misbehaviours of which music and its practice are inseparable parts. In so doing, the author diverges in his approach significantly from the way two contemporaries of his, the geographer and historian Ibn Khurradadhbīh (825-911) and the grammarian al-Mufaḍḍal ibn Salāma (830-905) used *malāhī*. They both wrote treatises entitled *Kitāb al-malāhī* (Book of Musical Instruments) dealing mainly with the characteristics, lexicographical and historical aspects of musical instruments as well as music in general without any pejorative reference to *malāhī*⁵. Nevertheless, Ibn abī'l-Dunya's interpretation and puritanic approach predominate in all subsequent literature on the *samāʿ*, a concept the author does not use.

The first *ḥadīth* reported by Ibn abī'l-Dunya refers to the *maʿūzif* and *qaināt* or *qiyān* (plur. of *qaina*)⁶.

⁴ To give a better sense of the style and method of argumentation employed by the protagonists, I decided to include here a more detailed analysis of two major works that represent two antagonistic views. The first is that of the jurist Ibn abī'l-Dunya, the second, which will be discussed later, is the work of a preeminent authority and master of many mystics: Majd al-dīn al-Ṭūsī al-Chazālī. The two works have been published with an English translation and commentaries by: JAMES ROBSON, *Tracts on Listening to Music* (London, 1938). All my citations are derived from this translation.

⁵ SHILOAH, *The Theory*, p. 193-194; 282-283.

⁶ ROBSON, *Tracts on Listening*, p. 19.

The ma'āzif

The *ḥadīth* itself explains this term as equivalent to *ʿālāt al-tarab*, that is to say, instruments of music. The concept *tarab* which attributes a myriad of emotions resulting from the solemn recitation of a poem and the effect of listening to music, has been used by extension to designate music. The second *ḥadīth* adds in connection with the *ma'āzif* that some of those who seek to arouse emotion by listening to instruments of music „will spend the night in food, drink and diversion” and „Allah will send on them the desolating wind”. Such conduct is among the fifteen misdeeds that will bring affliction upon their perpetrators. Other misdeeds include: princes who have gained spoils and keep them to themselves; treacherous behaviour; one who repels his father; one who elicits respect for fear of his maliciousness; wearing silk; drinking wine, having recourse to singing-girls and musical instruments⁷. Music and moral behaviour are thus intermingled.

Among the instruments specifically mentioned as forbidden are: the *mizmār* (reed-pipe) about which a *ḥadīth* states that upon hearing it, the Prophet plugged his ears and called it *mizmār al-shaitān* (the devil's *mizmār*); the *ʿūd* (lute), the *ṭanbūr* (pandora) and all the other stringed instruments; the different kinds of drums, with emphasis on the tambourine to which four successive *ḥadīths* are dedicated. The devil as instigator of music making, a frequent theme in the literature, appears in a few *ḥadīths* such as: „When a man rides a beast without mentioning Allah, the devil rides behind him and says to him: ‘Sing’; then, if he does not do it well, he says to him, ‘Do obeisance’”⁸.

The Singing-girls

In the days of idolatry that anteceded the advent of Islam, a period called by the Muslims *jāhiliyya* (time of ignorance or backwardness), there was a class of singing-girls known as *qiyān* or *qaynāt* (plur. of *qayna*). „They were, according to H.G. Farmer, invariably found in the household of every Arab of social standing”⁹. A legend regarding two of them named *Jarādatān* (two grasshoppers), recounts that after a lengthy drought, the ancient pleasure-loving people of ʿĀd, sent suppliants on pilgrimage to the shrine of Mecca to implore the deities for rain. There, they were so charmed by the singing of the *jarādatān*, that they forgot all about performing their religious duty. As a result, destruction was brought upon their people.

Singing-girls often participated along with other women who, according to Farmer, „enjoyed almost as much liberty as men”¹⁰ in the performance of music with instruments at family festivities. A significant aspect of the activities of these gifted women in the early days of Islam has been defined by the eminent scholar Charles Pellat in his article „About some women hostile to the

⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

⁹ H.G. Farmer, *A History of Arabian Music* (London 1929), p. 10.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Prophet"¹¹, as „the exploitation of the singing-girl's talent in the campaign of hostile propaganda against the Prophet and his followers". Pellat provides evidence of their role in disseminating such effective musical epigrams that they elicited condemnation of guilty parties. He also deals with the active participation of women and singing-girls in battles against the Muslims, exhorting the warriors with war songs accompanied by tambourines and improvising dirges to mourn the dead, like the daughter of 'Utba Rabi'a who lamented on her father's death in the battle of Badr. The dirges were the exclusive province of women and professional mourners. Their performance was associated with pagan customs such as scratching the face, rending of breasts, tearing of clothes, moaning, wailing, tearing one's hair and even shaving the head. These were among a number of other pagan customs against which the Prophet and his followers fought as expressed in the *ḥadīth* under the general slogan „destruction of the *jāhiliyya*". In this connection, a famous *ḥadīth* states in the name of the Prophet: „There are four upon whom Allah will not look on the day of resurrection, the sorceress, the wailing-woman, the singing-woman and the woman who is unfaithful to her husband"¹². Concerning the struggle against the singing-girls, Pellat concluded his article with the following eloquent statement which I translate as follows: „Their activity is a remarkable aspect of an unsettled struggle between two discourses, that of the pagans, whose verses, alongside the dagger and lance, were a powerful weapon against their adversaries, and that which constituted the divine word transmitted by Muhammad"¹³.

Returning to the Ibn abī-l-Dunya treatise, we shall touch upon one more theme implying the harmful effect music can produce in the heart of a listener. According to one *ḥadīth* reported by the author: „Singing makes hypocrisy grow in the heart as water makes the seed grow". A more radical statement about the effect of music was made by Yazīd ibn Walīd, one of the rare Omayyad caliphs who did not indulge in a life of pleasure: „O, Omayyads` avoid singing, for it decreases shame, and destroys manliness, and verily it takes the place of wine and does what drunkenness does. But if you must engage in it, keep the women and children away from it, for singing is the instigator of fornication"¹⁴.

II The Overwhelming power of Music

The foregoing overview, aimed at introducing the major arguments adduced by the opponents of music in the authoritative sacred texts of Islam, leads us to the principal questions of why and how this hostile attitude came into being. After all, one can envisage another plausible development according to which music enables the faithful to experience religious feelings to a higher and more effective degree, as did the many followers of the mystic confraternities. It seems to

¹¹ CHARLES PELLAT, „*Sur quelques femmes hostiles au Prophète*", *Vie du Prophète Mahomet* (Colloque Strasbourg 1980), p. 79.

¹² ROBSON, *Tracts on Listening*, p. 27.

¹³ PELLAT, *Prophète Mahomet*, p. 86.

¹⁴ ROBSON, *Tracts on Listening*, p. 27.

me that the term *samāʿ* which becomes predominant in subsequent literature, is one of the keys to an understanding of the controversy over the lawfulness or unlawfulness of music and dance. This is because *samāʿ* designates first and foremost passive listening to music, and only by implication indicates active expression and the making of music. Hence, in its treatment, primacy is given to the nature of the effect produced by listening to music. Referring to the influence of music in general, or the effect sought by its listeners who in those days represented primarily urban society, one finds an unequivocal belief in the overwhelming power of music. This marvelous power was in the main cultivated and sponsored by the aristocratic elite who were enriched by booty, and avid for earthly pleasures... Music was identified with the sweet tenderness of love, leaving the listener unable to resist strong emotions with strong emotions. This kind of „intoxication“ represented the actual model envisioned by the learned legalists who expressed hostility to music. Against this background I shall now submit the basic arguments of the protagonists.

The Mystic Dimension

The Polyvalent effect of music

The founders and leaders of the mystic orders in Islam used to propagate ideas regarding their doctrine in the form of short sayings; let us begin with a few such aphorisms about what they called „the secret meaning of the *samāʿ*“.

„Listening [*samāʿ*] is a power that creates divine influence which stirs the heart to seek Allah“. Dhu'l-Nūn al-Miṣri (9th century) a great master of the ‚inner science‘.

„Music does not produce in the heart what is not in it; hence it should be forbidden for those who are subject to mere intoxication“. Abu Sulaimān al-Dā-rānī (d. ca 820).

One of the earlier mystic leaders, al-Makkī (10th century) wrote in his treatise *Food of Hearts*: „The [singing] voice is an instrument said to carry and communicate meaningful ideas; when the listener perceives the meaning of the message without being distracted by the melody, his *samāʿ* is lawful; otherwise, and when the content expresses physical love, simple desire and simple futilities, the *samāʿ* is pure diversion and must be banished“. Only the righteous gnostic is capable of listening in this way and can be led by the *samāʿ* to genuine ecstasy and mystical union.

Another early sufi scholar al-Sarrāj (d. 988) who set forth the true principles of sufism in his *Book of the Sparks*, distinguished between the *samāʿ* of the vulgar and that of the elect, which includes various degrees.

Dealing with the different categories of *samāʿ*, e.g. forbidden, permitted, estimable and laudable, the mystic authority al-Maqdisī (13th century) said: „The effect of melodies is comparable to a container, if the drink is pure, it confers delicacy and transparency on the container; if muddy, the container will look

opaque and ugly". These sayings reflect a basic distinction made by sufi authorities between different levels of impact, or the polyvalent influence exerted by music and the dance.

Only those who have reached the degree of gnosis or one degree below, e.g. those well-versed in mystical knowledge, are capable of savoring the secret meaning of the *samāʿ*; this is not the case with the common folk, the ignorant or the novice for whom the *samāʿ* can be poisonous. Eventually they can attend ceremonial rites but they cannot take an active part in them¹⁵.

One of the greatest sufis of Islam who most nearly undertook the subtlest categorization of the mystic adepts' *samāʿ*, was the Spaniard Ibn al-ʿArabī (1165 to 1240). In his writings he distinguishes between two fundamental categories of *samāʿ*: the *mutlaq* (free or soundless) and the *muqayyad* (linked-up, associated with music); the latter has three subdivisions: the *ilāhī* (divine), the *ruḥānī* (spiritual); the *ṭabīʿī* (natural or sensual). Those who attain the degree of divine speak to God and listen through God because He is active in all that they hear; spiritual listening consists of the ear hearing how all things sing the Glory of God; the natural refers to the formal *samāʿ* as practised by the sufis, that is, actual music. Only few in old age attain the degree of the soundless *samāʿ*; they listen with their minds, very likely through concentration and contemplation¹⁶.

Probably following in the footsteps of Ibn al-ʿArabī, the sufi writer and poet al-Uskudārī (d. 1628) distinguished between two kinds of *samāʿ*: artificial and authentic. The authentic is subdivided into natural and spiritual of which the latter is a kind of free sound *samāʿ* achieved by sufi leaders and those who have attained the highest mystical degree¹⁷.

The Dhikr

The most remarkable ritual of the mystics was the *dhikr* (lit. remembrance) which referred to the Kuranic injunction: „To remember God as often as possible...”

The *dhikr* usually includes listening to music (*samāʿ*) and occasionally dancing. By the time the first organized ritual appeared, music and dance already played a prominent role in spiritual exercises leading to ecstasy (*wajd*) and mystical union.

The rich literature concerning the music and dance of the mystics, is in part polemical and in part devoted to the rules, the fundamental and structural aspects of the ritual, as well as to its symbolic meaning.

In this respect the sufi authority and master of many famous mystics Majd al-dīn, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī al-Ghazālī (d. 520\1121) provides us with an interesting presentation of the symbolic meaning of the music and dance ele-

¹⁵ For further information about sufism and *samāʿ*, see: FRITZ MEIER, „The Mystic Path”, chap. four in *The World of Islam*, ed. B. LEWIS, THAMES and HUDSON (London 1976) (first paperback ed. 1992); REYNOLD ALLEYNE NICHOLSON, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1967); JEAN DURING, *Musique et mystique dans les traditions de l'Iran* (Paris-Tehran 1989); A. GRIBETZ, „The *samāʿ* Controversy, Sufi vs. Legalist, in: *Studia Islamica* 74 (1991), p. 103-120.

¹⁶ SHILOAH, *The Theory*, p. 151-154.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 357-358.

ments of the sufi ritual". In his book which bears the colourful title: *The lightening flashes concerning the refutation of those who declare listening to music is forbidden*, and is largely dedicated to the legality of music, the author argues that: „the *samāʿ* is a matter necessary, in particular, (for) the Saints of Allah who apply the forms to the hidden meanings on account of their abandoning the ranks of the forms and their moving in the ranks of the branches of gnosis"¹⁹. At this point he proceeds by providing one of the most detailed analyses of the ritual forms by which the *dhikr* inspires the adepts to ecstasy. The following excerpts illustrate the importance of this: „The tambourine is a reference to the cycle of existing things; the skin which is fitted on to it is a reference to the absolute existence, the striking on the tambourine is a reference to the descent of divine inspiration from the innermost arcana upon general existence to bring forth the things pertaining to the essence from the interior to the exterior... And the voice of the singer is a reference to the divine life which comes down... The flute is a reference to the human essence... and the breath which penetrates the flute is a reference to the light of Allah (Exalted is He!) penetrating the reed of man's essence... And the dancing is a reference to the circling of the spirit round the cycle of existing things on account of receiving the effects of the unveilings of the revelations; and this is the state of the gnostic... And his leaping up is a reference to his being drawn from the human station to the unitive station and to existing things acquiring from him spiritual effects and illuminative helps... Then when he is detached from what is other than Allah... he takes off his clothing... Then if he rises to a higher station and the singer is speaking in a lower station ... he takes someone else and circles with him that their states may be united and his bond may be loosed. Then when he becomes thirsty and ask for a drink of water, it indicates that he is overpowered... and he has returned to the station of the body, since the station of the spirit is [that of] getting nourishment from the unseen"²⁰.

These brief excerpts describe the mystical union experienced by the gnostic at the highest level through the medium of *samāʿ*. According to Kalīm Allah, one of the leading Indian Tashishti saints (1650-1729), this occurs when the sufi is a true lover, that is to say: „like heart, like face" and fulfils seven a priori conditions among which are cleanliness, abstention from talking and laughing and ensuring that the singer does not receive payment"²¹.

The Mevlevis or Whirling Dervishes

The most spectacular and sophisticated music and dance associated with mystical practices are those of the Mevlewī order, a movement named after its founder, the great poet Mevlana Jalal al-din al-Rumi (d. 1273). In their ceremony called *ʿayn sharif* or *Mukabele* (mystical union) music and dance form an indivisible union, in which all details are highly formalized. A large group of dancers, known in the West as the whirling dervishes, wearing white gowns, black

¹⁹ See above Fn. 4.

²⁰ ROBSON, *Tracts on Listening*, p. 98.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98-101.

²² SHILOAH, *The Theory*, p. 242-243.

mantles and peaked caps, perform a highly spiritual and sophisticated dance to the accompaniment of a large professional orchestral and vocal ensemble that performs from a gallery. The orchestral section comprises numerous *ney* (oblique flute), one or two fiddles, lutes and zithers; the vocal group, seated apart, includes professional singers who also beat a variety of drums. Most of the music is composed by well-known musicians, and it therefore belongs essentially to the category of art music²².

This confraternity was the object of several harsh attacks on the part of leading traditionalists who were particularly contemptuous of their dancing and their use of forbidden instruments (see below). Authors belonging to the Mevlevis such as al-Ankarāwī (d. 1626), a leader of a Mevlevi group in Galata (Turkey), wrote several works in defence of their conception of *samāʿ* including the whirling dance, and emphasizing the influence of the *samāʿ* on the soul. Of particular interest are the writings of al-Nābulusī in the defence of musical instruments²³.

The defence of Musical Instruments

The Syrian mystic theologian al-Nābulusī (XVII-XVIII) who was affiliated with the Mevlevis, wrote several treatises, one of which is devoted entirely to the defence of musical instruments, as associated with diversion. *Malāhī*, he argues, does not necessarily indicate that musical instruments are always for purposes of diversion. If the true believer employs them with good intention and for beneficial purposes, they cannot be harmful in any way... they must be considered as a whole and cannot be separated into lawful and unlawful, a distinction proposed by some legalists, because there is no difference for instance between the approved drum and the rejected lute; both are musical instruments. Hence, if singing, playing instruments and dancing serve good purposes, they are permissible. Conversely, music, in all its forms, must be banished if associated with passions and intoxication²⁴.

A disciple of al-Nābulusī, al-Dikdikī (d.1775), while repeating the same arguments as his master adds that the difficulty lies in the technical term *malāhī*. Therefore, the legalists are correct when the reference is to debauchery, but the sufi's purpose is not entertainment and distraction; their recourse to instruments is a determinant factor in the attainment of ecstasy and consequently the instruments should be permitted. He also admits that the same holds true for art music and dance when they are associated with beneficial functions such as healing disease, encouraging hard work, and consoling grief²⁵.

In light of the foregoing, it should be noted that the Mevlevi's refined music, and particularly their dance, contrasts sharply with the loud invocations and tearing of garments that mark the frenetic trance induced by certain popular but

²² SHILOAH, *Music in the World of Islam. A Socio-Cultural Study* (London-Detroit 1995), p. 142-143.

²³ SHILOAH, *The Theory*, p. 55-57.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 290-294.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86-87.

fringe confraternities; their practice usually includes extreme manifestations of ecstatic dancing and other extravagant behavior²⁶.

III The Condemnation of the *Samāʿ* as conceived by the Mystics

In view of the extreme importance the sufis attached to music in their doctrine, it is only natural that the bulk of their opponents' attacks were directed at different aspects of their *samāʿ* practices and beliefs. The following statements are gleaned from sources that refute some of those essential aspects.

Concerning the practice of shouting during the celebration of the *dhikr* and tearing one's clothes upon entering a trance, the jurist Ibn Bisṭām (d. 1685) says: „it is better to worship in quietness and humility”, and : „You are not calling on a deaf entity and not invoking a remote God; He is all ears and near to you”²⁷. Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 1336) rejects dance, stamping of the feet, uncovering the head and tearing one's clothes, and predicts punishment for those who participate in or attend the *dhikr*. With respect to the sufi claim that they listen through God and that divine inspiration, ecstasy and mystic union attained through music and dance is comparable to the singing and dancing of angels, ibn al-Ḥājj also says: „You elevate yourself to the rank of angels and in so doing you are liars”²⁸. Another jurist, ibn Qudāma (d. 1223) considers this claim as a transgression of the divine laws despite their sincere devotion to God²⁹. Finally, Badr al-din al-Bisṭāmī (1341-1404) rejects the idea that the *samāʿ* on earth can be compared to that of Paradise and its inhabitants. In celestial music, the beautiful voice of the angel seraphim and the spellbinding power of his hymns inspire the birds and houris to sing³⁰. (This approach contrasts with Jewish kabbalistic ideas about the parallel singing of the angels and Israel thus creating harmony between microcosm and macrocosm.)³¹

Many scholars refer to the harmful effect of music on man's behaviour and judgement, as it drives him to act like one who has gone mad - an effect also associated with drinking wine, fornication, and other vices. Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Ṭurṭūshī (d. 1126) also equates the effect of wine with that of music, claiming it is stupefying and causes insipid reactions, depravity and disgrace³². Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) considers the effect of the *samāʿ* analogous to the intoxication of one possessed by Satan. He sees it as the source of depravity causing the devotee to deviate from the only true *samāʿ*, which is listening to *Kurʿan* cantillation³³.

²⁶ For further details, see: SHILOAH, *Music in the World of Islam*, p. 143-148.

²⁷ SHILOAH, *The Theory*, p. 159.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³¹ See: SHILOAH, *Jewish Musical Traditions* (Wayne State University Press, 1992) (paperback, 1995), p. 144-152.

³² SHILOAH, *The Theory*, p. 351.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

The mystic's ecstatic dance is said to demonstrate his infinite love of God; it serves as a means to attain sublime heights. Naturally the most violent attacks against it came from the canonists and theologists who at best considered it a form of *liḥ* - play and amusement. As a matter of fact, in Yemen and other places dancing is called *laḥba*. The Ottoman religious authority Kinalizade (d. 1572) explains that the whirling and dancing of the sufi have nothing to do with what is commonly called dance (*raqs*) which is: „a play accompanied by a double-headed drum and *mizmār* (oboe-like instrument) presented in sessions of debauches attended by women”³⁴. The jurist ibn Taymiyya denounces the dancing of the sufis and practices such as self-mutilation, and concludes that anyone who indulges in such behavior is an infidel and polytheist³⁵. Al-sāḳizī (d. 1294) compares their dancing to the cock-fights held by the Christians and claims that only mad people devote themselves to dancing which is only good for women³⁶. Al-Ṭurṭūshī, the Spanish authority on law and tradition says that the sufi's dance is like that of the Golden Calf which is characteristic of atheists. The rhythmical beating with a wand is a Manichean invention, intended to turn Muslims away from the book of Allah. Anyone who accepts the *samā* is a freethinker³⁷.

The Inspiration of Satan

The juristconsult, traditionalist and preacher Abū'l-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī (1126-1200) presents one of the harshest diatribes against music and dance in his book *Talbīs Iblīs* (The Devil's Delusion). The book stresses the predominating idea that music is basically temptation of the devil. *Iblīs* dominates the soul, making it slave to its passions if it does not resist³⁸. According to a tradition reported by both al-Kisā'ī and al-Tha`labī in their respective *Qisṣ al-anbiyā'* (Stories of the prophets) *Iblīs* inhabits waste dumps and unclean places such as ruins and tombs. His recitation is poetry, his call to prayer (*adhān*) dwells in the *mazāmīr* (plur. of *mizmār*) (oboe-like instruments) his traps are women and his drink is intoxicating liquor. To bolster his argumentation, ibn al-Jawzī refers to a tradition reported by the historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 922) according to which the inventor of musical instruments is a descendant of Kabel (Cain) named Tubal, who constructed pleasure-giving instruments such as flutes, drums and lutes; the descendants of Cain used them to divert themselves. The news reached the descendants of Seth who lived in the mountains; some of them came down to the plains, indulged in debauchery and were addicted to intoxicating drinks. This story, which exists in many Arabic versions, is basically founded on Jewish exegesis pertaining to the stories of creation, and particularly to Jubal to whom the invention of music and musical instruments is attributed (Genesis: 4, 21). It should be noted in this context that all the motifs referring to the identification of music with depravity, with the evil power of satan, and with the descendants of Cain, are combined very fancifully

³⁴ Ibid., p. 252.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 223.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 317.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 351.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 163-164.

in the Ethiopian work *The Book of Adam and Eve* that was written in Arabic during the fifth or sixth century by some pious Christian in Egypt. This story tells that Satan entered the newly invented instruments and induced sweet beautiful sounds from them..."

By-products of the hostile approach to music are legal questions such as the selling of a slavegirl singer, the selling of a musical instrument; hiring musicians; teaching music; the reliability of a musician's testimony in a court of law and so forth. The *ḥisba* manuals which detail every Muslim's duty to promote good and banish evil, belong to this category. The *Muḥtasib* is the individual who was effectively entrusted with the enforcement of this rule as he supervises moral behaviour in the towns and above all, in the markets. It is the *Muḥtasib*'s duty, for example to destroy musical instruments that are openly displayed, and to make their wood available for other purposes.

Concluding Note

In this article I have endeavoured to present the most important aspects of the intense debate about the lawfulness of music in Islam.

Soon after the advent of Islam one witnesses the emergence of the first signs of opposition to music - a development led by certain religious authorities, particularly the jurists and traditionalists. In the absence of clearly articulated positive or negative statements about music in the most sacred book - the Koran - protagonists on each side sought confirmation in the huge store of traditions - *ḥadīth* - that in the course of time acquired force of law. Many *ḥadīth* were ambivalent, however, and could be interpreted both ways. Moreover, many were forged, so it was impossible to reach any unanimous conclusions.

With the emergence of the numerous mystic confraternities, the debate became increasingly heated since music and dance were doctrinally essential to the performance of the sufi rituals, which enabled the faithful to experience religious feelings to the most effective degree. Thus, almost from the beginning, one is confronted with a paradoxical phenomenon characterizing the place and role of music in worship. On one hand, there was the absence of an official religious or Mosque music; on the other, music and dance fulfilled a prominent role in most mystic societies.

This is the more or less external aspect of the subject. As food for thought I have proposed some possible hypotheses in answer to the intriguing question of how to explain the intransigent hostility to music on the part of so many religious authorities.

* All the aforementioned traditions are analysed in my collected studies: *The Dimension of Music in Islamic and Jewish Culture* (chapter 2, on the 'ūd and the Origin of Music), (London 1993).